

Controversy Among Gentlemen

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If anthologies were compiled to illustrate twentieth century commentary on Shakespeare, they might justifiably be overweight in material from the early years. That era, a golden age for literary controversy, included long discussions about the very origins of his plays and poems. Not only did several significant books appear; sequels were clearly economic. So authors responded to critics, while "supporters" followed the battles at leisure. And some aspects of those disputes may, even now, have lessons to impart. If there were giants in the earth in those days, none stood taller than George Greenwood (1850 - 1928) and J. M. Robertson (1856 - 1933). Cut and thrust between these two was always fierce, although reasonably civil. Both Members of Parliament in the Liberal cause, they readily described themselves as "friends"—but how they argued! The passing of the decades has given a sense of distant charm to their debating, without in any way diminishing its importance.

Granville George Greenwood, who was educated at Eton and Cambridge University (where he took a First in Classics), made the law his profession. Knighted in the 1916 New Year Honors List, he is largely remembered for his insistence—so astounding to many that it meets with ridicule rather than serious attention—that the great writer Shakespeare simply could not have been the man from Stratford-upon-Avon. This was expressed emphatically, along with his reasons, in a volume published in 1908: *The Shakespeare Problem Restated* (SPR). Later works contained some additional thoughts, but were given over mostly

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to defense against critics. Who 'Shake-speare' was (or the various people using that name were) George Greenwood was reluctant to say. He also wrote on other subjects: amusingly, in terms of punning, one of his works on an entirely different matter published in 1918, was entitled *The problem of the will*.

Understandably, Greenwood took pains to deny that he was a defamer of the Shakespearean accomplishment, for he saw the works as superb. He always insisted too that he was not a Baconian, although critics and others—through either slackness or perversity—often described him as such¹. Admired by those who disbelieve in the traditionally accepted authorship of 'Shakespeare', he has become something of a father figure within each of their various persuasions. This is partly because of the range and vigor of his arguments which served as a valuable conspectus; partly because the concept of a 'great unknown' as the master-mind behind the plays and poems provides an umbrella for theories from a variety of doubters. He left in one of his books in particular (ITSP) good advice, which has often gone unheeded, on the subject of how weak arguments can deflect attention from better ones.

Greenwood's principal contemporary opponent on the subject of Shakespeare's identity came from a very different background. John Mackinnon Robertson, was born in Scotland at Brodick, Isle of Aran. Leaving school at the age of 13, he subjected himself to intensive and sustained self-education through a formidable program of reading. This eventually bore fruit in the publication of nearly a hundred books or other monographs. Those writings fall into four categories. There is a very small miscellaneous group; several works on the social sciences; a large number of volumes and articles concerned with literary criticism and particularly the Elizabethan age. The fourth category, largest of all, relates to religion and free thought—Robertson was an uncompromising rationalist. His achievements as writer and politician were acknowledged locally as well as nationally at the time of his death². Yet he is surprisingly little known today, being omitted from many reference works where one might expect objective evaluation of his accomplishment. However, there are two specialist studies³ which strive to do justice to his considerable achievements.

In the literary sphere, Robertson made his mark with a detailed work attempting to refute the idea that the Shakespearean output was really that of Bacon (BH 1913). Much of it seeks to overturn Greenwood's contentions about Shakespeare's Stratford education, his vocabulary, knowledge of the law, and similar issues. There were (and are) scholars and critics who would have had Robertson stop at this point. However, his numerous later books set forth views based upon stylistic analysis. These writings were less well regarded by literary orthodoxy.

For, by the wholehearted application of aesthetic scrutiny and judgment, based on continual reading and exceptional memory, he was led to believe that the Shakespeare corpus contained the work of several dramatists. So Robertson reasoned that Shakespeare drew on the writings (often unpublished) of others, sometimes just for economy, but on occasion because passages were capable of enhancement via his own glorious hand⁴.

Meanwhile Sir George, his works characterized by a somewhat legalistic style of debating, along with occasional Latin quotations, was never interested in the possibility of defeat by Robertson or anyone else⁵. Although dogmatic himself, he felt it necessary to warn his adversary about dangers in being too "cocksure" (ITSP 11). Very much in the minority with his views on the question of Shakespeare's identity, he appreciated receiving the support of people such as Mark Twain—"the praise of those whose praise I estimate" (VS 11). He was keen to respond to any reasoned argument; what he would not tolerate were slurs upon his integrity. Thus, when it was suggested that he had lied on a particular issue, he found it necessary to remind that particular critic about the ground rules for all civilized debate between honorable people—"controversy among gentlemen," as he termed it⁶. The two gentlemen discussed here were intellectually active to the end of their days, each a marvellous illustration of the Robertsonian dictum that "a mind really worth having in old age must be the product of [mental activity in] all one's preceding years"⁷. Sir George, when in his late seventies, still wrote to *The Times* on various matters, by far his favourite theme being animal rights⁸. As for the fiery Scot, he was still pursuing literary issues into the early 1930s, claiming that, purely on stylistic grounds, he could identify an anonymous book reviewer⁹.

By then, Robertson had penned many volumes proclaiming the verdict resulting from his minute examination of the Elizabethan dramatic texts. The search for verbal parallels between Shakespearean passages and those of his contemporaries was supported through an examination of the flow of verse, line endings, word juxtaposition, diction and imagery. He claimed that we can differentiate sharply between the work of the various Elizabethan dramatists by such scrutiny. In terms of versification, for example, some lines have double-endings; that is, they end with an additional syllable. Some others are "end-stopped"; sense and rhythm are linked to the line ending. Robertson, keeping in mind the likely date of each work being analyzed, offered percentages of lines which "run on", are end-stopped or have double endings. Perceiving such work about style similarities across long passages of text to be much needed literary detection for the proper appreciation of Shakespeare, he longed to see it eventually

removed from the realm of individual aesthetic judgement and placed on a firm scientific footing.

Robertson's arguments about style recognition, being cumulative, really defy concise exposition. Essentially, the outcome of his analysis of verse rhythms on a massive scale, along with examination of each individual writer's vocabulary and diction, is that he sees—within Shakespeare's texts—passages from Greene, Peele, or others, but more especially the use of material penned by either George Chapman¹⁰ or Christopher Marlowe. If we deny the results of this kind of analysis, he insisted, we must assume Shakespeare to have written, more or less concurrently, both at his glorious best and in inferior or archaic fashion. Twelve or more Shakespeare plays, mostly but not entirely early ones, are said to rely on one or more of these other hands. These include *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of The Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Julius Caesar*.

Perhaps the most significant links of all, when we consider word frequencies or associations along with those pointers relating to versification, concern two history plays. "There are so many salient parallels in *Richard The Second* to (Marlowe's) *Edward The Second* that we must either avow his presence or assume Shakespeare to have aimed at all manner of unimportant imitations." It is urged that the *King Henry The Sixth* plays are a collaboration, but that "Marlowe dominates all three," the opening "hung be the heavens with black ..." passage being perhaps the most Marlovian in the whole of the Shakespeare Folio. The style is the man: "had the study of versification been kept to the forefront as it should have been, the ascription of any of the *King Henry The Sixth* plays to Shakespeare could hardly have been persisted in" (MC 93). Even the passage in that play which includes a famous reference relating to the "tiger's heart" and leads into lines anticipating the 'Will' sonnets does not escape. Robertson insists: "that the hand is Marlowe's ... is the only rational aesthetic inference open to us" (MC 145).

This concept of plurality of hands aroused academic attention. For a time there was even some increase in support. Yet scholars of his day often felt that Robertson went too far. Reviewers mixed guarded praise with caveats. H. Dugdale Sykes, for example, stated that it could be hazardous to attribute a play to more than one hand because the style is not homogeneous, but then added: "it would be idle to deny the value of the searching examination to which he has subjected the texts ... full of acute and illuminating criticism". Una Ellis-Fermor admired "the ease with which he (Robertson) moves among data so numerous and so complex". And an anonymous review (of SC, part 4) in *The Times Literary Supplement*, said that he had "done more than any contemporary critic of Shakespeare to increase awareness of the nature and extent

of *problems for which some solution must be found*" (my emphasis).

Yet many were prepared to accept solely the external evidence—those fine plays bear an author's name, that name was affirmed by the First Folio in 1623, therefore they must be entirely by him. Robertson, in reply, insisted that even the greatest genius is affected by the conventions of his age. Certainly, in Shakespeare's time, borrowing and collaboration were rife. The latter was unavoidable within the Elizabethan theatre's economic conditions: it was practiced by others, including Marlowe. And (we might go on to wonder) would not such disguised 'takeovers' explain the caricature of one apparently prepared to make all men's work his, that very dramatist who "would be thought our chief", in one of Ben Jonson's epigrams?

"He marks not whose 'twas first and aftertimes
May judge it to be his as well as ours".

Naturally the Scot, for all his endeavour, was no more free from possible error than other Shakespearean critics. The very best of ears may be mistaken: lacking the resources for the fully scientific approach which he urged, our man was clearly very reliant upon the powers of his own, while his tone may sometimes seem unnecessarily pugnacious. Several other features of his writings may be noted as possible faults. On occasion the same determination that had taken him to such learning after considerable early disadvantage, led to pushing what may be basically good argument into untenable positions. There may be much in a play which sounds like (for instance) Marlowe or Chapman; this does not necessarily mean that all such *is* either Chapman or Marlowe. Nor does the fact that Shakespeare wrote the best work mean that none of the lesser work could also be his. It is evident that Robertson worked in isolation: links with colleagues might have moderated some of his views. Sometimes he offers assertions, with too little supporting evidence provided. There is at least one claim made which cannot be substantiated, for he argues that Marlowe and Shakespeare must have been acquainted. We certainly have no proof of that.

The power to persuade us about sundry stylistic pointers may depend upon how valid we consider vocabulary and versification tests: they can never be absolutely exact and definitely require support via other kinds of evidence. Shakespeare's style was doubtless still evolving in the early plays: his progress towards metrical freedom may have been uneven. Thus it could be simplistic to attribute a play to more than one hand because it lacks a uniform style. Some such "judgments" may be subjective or erroneous. Nevertheless, four things can be said of Robertson:

- * He prized historical truth more than scholastic reputations or passive acceptance of a received view.
- * Whatever his excesses, the general thrust of the arguments is often persuasive to those open to receive primary evidence, both aural and visual, unencumbered by preconceptions.
- * He admired the genius of Shakespeare and believed only thorough textual analysis of the plays would help differentiate that genius from the work of lesser men.
- * He always affirmed, against the insistence of Sir George Greenwood and others, that this essential Shakespeare was a writer and actor from Stratford-upon-Avon.

Since Robertson and Greenwood were constantly arguing about that last crucial matter, it seems most strange to see their views firmly bracketed by a modern commentator. Yet, in his panoramic history of all the Shakespearean biographies, *Shakespeare's Lives* (428), Samuel Schoenbaum remarks: "the true irony in the association of the believer (Robertson) with the arch-heretic (Greenwood) lies in the actual closeness of their stances". Moreover, that seemingly surprising verdict can easily be justified. For they both proclaimed that the Shakespeare enterprise comprised one master-mind, but many pens. What Robertson believed on the basis of intensive stylistic analysis, Greenwood had concluded earlier on the evidence of Shakespeare's breadth of knowledge, legal allusions, apparent foreign travel and vast vocabulary. On the same page of his book, Schoenbaum quotes a Greenwood claim that it was now (i.e. early in the 20th century) generally admitted that Shakespeare did not write a large portion of the dramas in the 1623 Folio. Some seventy five years on, Dr. Schoenbaum makes his own most remarkable addition: "*And so, at the time, it was*" (my emphasis).

The comprehensive story of Shakespeare biographies over four centuries, which Schoenbaum's volume unfolds, contains astonishing incidents relating to - among other matters - guesswork, forgery, and massive self-deception. Yet those seven words just quoted and stressed, innocent though they appear, have their own capacity to astonish. If plurality in the Shakespeare works was widely accepted by scholars circa 1915, just how, why, and when did perceptions change? We would have to read on carefully in *Shakespeare's Lives* to find out, for it certainly will not do for those seeking to know the genuine facts of the past to say, as the learned professor does at the very end of his book, that "each generation must reinterpret the documentary record by its own lights" (568). For this remark, taken in its context, seems to carry a hint of mere expediency or "fashion following"—that it is good sense to support

whatever is today's scholarly consensus. Yet integrity demands that the accurate representation of history should be prized above unthinking conformity. And, most certainly, it was not new archival discovery that gradually changed views about the unity of Shakespeare'. The greatest searches of records had been made by the end of the century's first decade. They were conducted by Dr. and Mrs. C.W. Wallace, who sifted literally millions of archival records searching for new light on activities of the man from Stratford-on-Avon, but came up with disappointingly little—indeed nothing of real literary consequence. Greenwood had noted these discoveries, taking them in his stride. They offer threat neither to a hypothesis about 'many hands nor to one on author identity.

Evidence of when the pendulum really swung concerning majority perceptions of what constitutes truth (in this matter of unity in Shakespearean composition) is found principally in a 1924 pamphlet (DS). The enormous influence of this on subsequent thinking was inversely proportionate to its size¹¹. It comprises the text of a lecture given in that year by Sir Edmund Chambers to The British Academy. Chambers was later to be acknowledged as the greatest Shakespearean biographer of the century. His views, soon endorsed by others as well as in his own later work, greatly reassured those conservatives who had been so worried by Robertson, if not by Greenwood. Why, the very champion who had fought so nobly against the 'Baconian heresy' had now become awkward, by constantly raising difficulties himself! Some solution to the problems identified simply had to be found—here was a well argued one from a great scholar. And, as the attack upon the received faith was rebuked by such an authoritative source as Chambers, the reaction of many (often uncritical worshippers) was very much a question of: "for this relief, much thanks." Robertson had simply wanted to probe for historical facts, to indicate parts of *The Complete Works* which might be 'alien', yet the very thought of any 'plurality' upset many uncritical Shakespeare admirers—as a later Robertson book (LD) readily acknowledged. His ideas on Elizabethan literature had become as much a thorn in the orthodox flesh as, in a different sphere, were his rationalist writings.

It was the verdict of Sir Edmund, pronouncing the unity of 'Shakespeare', that inexorably shaped the academic consensus of succeeding generations in this matter. In a masterly exposition, his 1924 British Academy lecture stressed the value of external signs of authorship (title pages and the attributions in the 1623 Folio) as well as emphasizing the value of internal evidence. We would identify (say) any Chapman play by such external attribution; so, if that kind of identification is itself unsafe, how can we claim to recognize Chapman's

style in Shakespeare? That *Titus Andronicus* was at least partly written by another is conceded by the lecturer, since there is early tradition to suppose so; likewise plays not included in the Folio, although bearing Shakespeare's name or initials, can safely be discounted. Chambers went on to argue that stylistic diversity in the plays may be explained by experimentation with different modes of writing, or the great author being not consistently at the top of his form, or failing to complete all of his intended revisions. Language similarities and parallel passages with other dramatists would simply denote a keen ear and retentive memory.

An earlier 'disintegrator' than Robertson (Sir Edmund reminded us) had been F.G.Fleay, a man of talent, but possessing "a demon of inaccuracy". Thus, it is rather oddly argued, it must *always* be unwise to follow any pluralistic authorship path. Our Scot means well, we are told: he identifies a genuine problem, but his solution is wrong. These matters are picked up again in Chambers' two volume biography of Shakespeare, although it is there admitted that the great dramatist may have polished or developed alien plays in his early work and that the influence of Marlowe is discernible well into Shakespeare's career.

These arguments for authorship unity were superbly marshalled, but are they correct? Chambers always commands our admiration yet, like all mortals, is not immune from the possibility of error. Without querying either his right to hold these beliefs or his great presentational skills, it must be remarked that experienced civil servants (as he then was) have to be experts in making a case; they shift emphasis, or reinterpret evidence to meet new political needs¹². Robertson, for his part, rejected the criticism and sought to rebut it in some further volumes, insisting that there was too much blind reverence for The First Folio: "the Foliolators can never recognise hands"(GS 46). He was obliged to point out that even Chambers had accepted *some* plurality to help explain inferior work found in Shakespeare. There are remarks from him too in writings on subjects other than Elizabethan literature which might be applied to the attempted rebuttal by Chambers. These suggest that history shows many examples of well reasoned but innovative arguments being resisted for as long as possible. "Every new reading of the past ... has been at its inception denounced as stupid"¹³. This may sound prophetic to those who know the power of a prevailing consensus, with substantial reputations and publications irrevocably locked into it, to ignore or suppress all 'boat-rockers'.

In direct response to Chambers, Robertson protested that the "thesis that pretends to safeguard the challenged creed... leaves all the salient problems darker than before" (SC 1925, 1). But, with regard to influencing the scholarly route among future specialists in Elizabethan

literature, Chambers prevailed as if by fiat. The view of authorship plurality in *The Complete Works*, once widely considered seriously as both reasonable or even probable, was to be dismissed. Denied the oxygen of wide-scale debate, shut out most effectively from the higher education curriculum, the Robertsonian hypothesis became increasingly that of a voice crying in the wilderness. His final volume of all on the subject (SC 1932) began by warning students against such “academic tactics” (but we know that students must be guided largely by the advice of their tutors) and ended with a brief, but obviously heart-felt lament concerning “the grossest aesthetic confusion” that arose from rejection of a plural authorship theory.

Coincidentally, soon after the publication of the text for the Chambers lecture, there had appeared in the national press a letter from Robertson (LMM) which is intriguing in more than one respect. It noted that orthodox commentators have declared that Juliet’s allusion to Jove: *Romeo and Juliet* (II.ii. 92-93) has its source in Ovid, adding that this is no problem since Shakespeare had to hand the Marlowe translation of Ovid’s *Amores*.

“For Jove himself sits in the azure skies
And laughs below at lovers’ perjuries”.

Robertson’s point is that the reference is not extracted from the *Amores*, but from another work by Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, not available in English until many years after Shakespeare’s death. So how without help, we may ask, could that man “of small Latin ... !” (Enter the ghost of Greenwood, smiling). There may, of course, be a hidden and acceptable explanation, but Robertson’s reaction to the error in orthodox supposition as exposed by his find was that it shows how an idea can be first accepted uncritically, then perpetuated—even passing “unchallenged for over a hundred years through the hands of the most distinguished editors of Shakespeare” (LMM). This might equally well be applied to those who, all too thankfully and comprehensively, had jettisoned his theories in the light of the Chambers lecture.

Sir Edmund Chambers, as behoves a senior government officer, had an incisive mind, a remarkable grasp of facts and superb organizational abilities. It would be foolish not to heed most carefully any pronouncement of his on the subject of Shakespeare, but posterity may have listened so well that there has been insufficient incentive for serious consideration of at least partial admission for the alternative ‘pluralistic’ answer. After all, as Chambers himself reminded us, to acquiesce lazily is but to invite ossification of views; we must, he insists, dig in the Shakespearean garden regularly for ourselves in order to

“turn our notional assents ... into real assents” (DS 22). No commentator holds, by right, a monopoly of truth. Reaction in either direction is helpful: the ‘pluralists’ may well go too far at times; the ‘unifiers’ may protest too much. If Robertson needed to moderate his views, so do his critics. Moreover, while the explanation offered by Chambers—for what he sees as a style diversity that is more apparent than real—is certainly plausible, so is the alternative of composite work, involving many contributors. We have to decide how to choose between them.

Before giving our “real assent” we should look at the textual evidence—parallel passages as well as frequencies of word usage, line endings and diction. A specialist encyclopedia, edited by Boyce, strikes the right note on Robertson: “his overall thesis is generally thought to be exaggerated”. It doubtless is so in places. Yet any free-thinking modern investigator of the structure of Shakespearean composition, reading widely in the literature of the age and developing an ear for style, cadences and phrase repetition could come to feel that the Scot was broadly on the right lines. There is such a range of different stylistic-type evidence on display and the accumulated effect of it all is compelling. There are remarkable parallel passages too, as may be seen from just two examples involving Marlowe:

Their fingers made to quaver on a lute,
 Their arms to hang about a lady’s neck,
 Their legs to dance and caper in the air...

Marlowe: *2 Tamburlaine* (I.iv)

He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber
 To the lascivious pleasing of a lute

Shakespeare: *King Richard III* (I.i)

One is no number; maids are nothing then,
 Without the sweet society of men.

Marlowe: *Hero and Leander* (Part 1, Sestiad 1)

Among a number one is reckoned none ...

Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* (136)

It is unfortunate that Professor Schoenbaum and other recent commentators have been both more comprehensively dismissive and less courteous to the Robertsonian view than was Sir Edmund Chambers. The latter used the word ‘disintegration’ only because he was concerned that the unity of the Shakespeare work and the skill of the supreme dramatic craftsman should not be undervalued. Alas, the term

was later turned into a useful label to justify instant rejection, as academic orthodoxy in the matter became progressively more rigid. Such style analysis, we are told in effect, is a waste of mental effort; either pseudo-scholarship or nugatory endeavor. And to praise Robertson brings forth Schoenbaum's scorn. H.N. Gibson, for example, had done so and is suitably rebuked. In a 1960s attack on Shakespeare authorship heresy, Gibson rashly claimed that the only work of Robertson's he appeared to know (BH) had demolished all Greenwood's arguments. He thus hailed Robertson as a great Elizabethan scholar. Schoenbaum, when reacting to this, became quite feisty, denouncing Dr. Gibson's naivety in giving undeserved credibility to the "prince of disintegrators" (428). The quoted phrase sounds all too uncomfortably close to 'prince of darkness'. It seems that dissenters from the prevailing creed are at first simply queried, then marginalized, and finally recommended for excommunication.

Surprisingly, if we leave aside for the moment Greenwood's belief about the very identity of Shakespeare, we may question as Schoenbaum did (though hopefully in a kinder tone) whether the gap between these fascinating protagonists from the early part of the century, although it certainly existed, was ever quite as wide as might be supposed by the quantity and vehemence of their arguments. The orthodox view of the plays as offered by Chambers is that, whatever internal diversity exists, or seems to exist within the Shakespeare works, there was a "single shaping spirit of imagination" (DS 5), and that "common sense revolts" (WSFP 1.219) unless one agrees that "a single mind and a single hand dominate them". How do the other critics fare in relation to this criterion? Greenwood gives a clear echo: "many pens, but one master mind" (ITSP 454). Robertson, for his part, stated that Shakespeare was "content to transfigure, much or little, the faulty performances of other men ... inlaying their webs with his threads of gold, lifting their often halting verse and broken music ... to the utmost altitudes of song" (SC 1923, 211). Moreover, near the end of his life, the Scot gave a hint that his zest for pointing to what he saw as the alien hands in Shakespeare might have partly misled the critics; he insisted that he had always believed that more than half of *The Complete Works* came directly from the pen of the master (LT).

Unfortunately, it seems that for many people, as the passage of time adds to the sheer quantity and complexity of history, helpful probabilities within the consensus must be counted as certainties; possibilities which have aided one's cause are termed probabilities; speculations which do likewise become seen as (at least) possibilities; radical counter-arguments become regarded only as quaint and unworthy of sustained attention. The authority of Chambers being rightly respected, his stance

was accepted as entirely correct. What is so sadly amiss is that, as an academic system building proceeded on that foundation, the alternative view gradually faded from sight. The concept of plurality in Shakespearean authorship is not likely to loom large in any modern literary syllabus, nor find favour with many of today's dons. In some matters, the head shaking of experts is likely to prove decisive, at least for all practical purposes; this was one such. Yet even Chambers himself, if read aright, is forced to admit 'a patchwork quilt': it is simply that Robertson insisted that the patches are more frequent and curious than had been previously recognized.

Objective examination of the evidence may yet show that, whatever the excesses of Robertson (or any by Greenwood for that matter), problems were identified which were not entirely removed by insistence on the essential unity of Shakespeare. Chambers showed an alternative to the 'many hands' argument—what *could* have happened. But did it? A 'solution' had been found, but was it right—or even fully adequate as an explanation of the 'alien material' found by Robertson? Does not the latter theory fit in with the Jonson epigram?

We come back to the issue of choice between the interpretations of Chambers Robertson, or indeed (if we are sufficiently brave) Greenwood. This should not be made in advance either on the basis of what one would hope to be true, or on account of Sir Edmund's deservedly high reputation. For those sufficiently interested to read and re-read the texts voraciously, there is primary evidence to be weighed. The most reasonable way of testing is one of dispassionate hermeneutics: to interpret by getting as close as possible to the source of the Shakespeare 'river'; to examine, without prejudice, the works attributed to him alongside those of contemporaries. And all this with close attention being paid to style, parallelisms, line structure and verse flow. The fair conclusion may well be that, despite some overstatement by the Scot, there *is* a good deal of stylistic plurality in *The Complete Works*; that there *are* other voices. And that this phenomenon intermingles most curiously with what seems to be genuine 'Shakespearean' material.

Robertson well knew that "a scientific debate was still some way off" (SC 1925, xii). How he would have relished the opportunity provided by computers for stylometrical analysis! Yet there are reasons for retaining the laborious and seemingly old-fashioned techniques that he applied. For technology-led analysis of texts from previous centuries uses only *some* weapons from the Robertsonian armory. And one requires a 'feel' for the literature which it is difficult for machine intelligence to simulate at present¹⁴. There is more involved than word counts, word juxtapositions, and similarities of phrase. Some of the complex comparative analysis needed calls for essentially human,

though objective, qualities in interpretation. In seeking to apply these, we might do well to remember that all such stylistic testing is but one kind of evidence, needing corroboration via other routes. Moreover, with regard to any computerized stylistic testing, there is a very poor track record to date in terms of consistency: such examination of Elizabethan texts has unfortunately thrown up many conflicting results. Eric Sams has remarked upon what he sees as the considerable drawbacks in existing machine analysis of literary styles, but does suggest that there may yet be progress in such testing if distinction can truly be made "between influence, imitation, parody or plagiarism on the one hand, and actual authorship on the other" (191).

It has been argued that a way forward could be through neural networking. This concerns a proposal for technological stylometry tests which is analogous to ideas in neuropsychology. Matthews and Merriam, applying that technique at the University of Aston, England, have claimed that it separates essentials from background, rather like the human mind and eye pick out the face wanted within a crowd. Nevertheless, difficulties still arise. Care must be taken to ensure that any such analysis does not (via prior assumptions at the input stage) automatically endorse received orthodoxy. For instance, to offer the computer the text of plays by Marlowe and Shakespeare and then to look for guidance as to which of them (if either) wrote the anonymous drama *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, would be a method fundamentally flawed. For can we be certain that the 'style' of any Shakespeare play offered for such an exercise is itself truly homogeneous—the work of a single pen?

Whatever machine-based scrutiny of texts does or does not eventually achieve, there is continuing scope for stylistic analysis by individuals on the texts of Shakespeare and his age. Although this may at times be informal, it requires much time and rigor: reading and re-reading the plays and poems, with a keen interest in what makes a distinctive style; an ear for sound and repetition of phrase, an eye for line endings, a retentive memory. Intellectual integrity demands that such efforts be without fixed preconceptions—either about the extent of our supreme Bard's learning, or regarding any unusual 'composition rights' he may have held. Neither Robertson nor Greenwood would expect more than this of us, but they would respect nothing less.

Conclusions

Firstly, this debate between protagonists surprisingly modern in their outlook, remains an intriguing 'quarrel' of great verve and integrity, most worthy of renewed attention¹⁵.

Furthermore, while this is not an occasion to pursue in any detail

Greenwood's idea of an 'alternative Shakespeare', we may at least say that efforts to investigate or refute such theories encourages the scanning of a great range of the plays, thus having the potential to help people appreciate a wider range of Shakespearean work than many would ever otherwise manage. They prompt most useful consideration of the great author's background knowledge as well as stylistic issues. Certainly, attempts to prove wrong any advocate of Bacon, The Earl of Oxford, Marlowe or another as the true author, or part-author, of Shakespeare's works should be based on reason and evidence, not ridicule. I have taken up these matters in detail elsewhere, in what seeks to be an independent and open-minded history of all such authorship controversy since 1900.

Thirdly, the course of the debate from the mid 1920s, involving the increasing isolation of Robertson, shows how some avenues of investigation can be blocked in established academic circles via the hasty or too sweeping dismissal of unpopular theories.

Fourthly, it may be noted that Greenwood had argued for collaborative authorship, basing his view on the obvious range of Shakespeare's knowledge, interests, and vocabulary. Robertson's style tests are but another route to the same conclusion. If, as is contended here, they are correct in principle concerning covert plurality in the Shakespeare canon, and Robertson is right in several—although not all—of the specific examples offered, there is a host of related major questions to be answered. Shakespeare, the master-hand, must then have interwoven with his own original writings the work of others; sometimes edited, sometimes unchanged. Did he collaborate without acknowledging helpers, did he 'borrow' material without permission, or do both? How could he have collaborated in some cases? In particular, how could someone of lowly status have the power and opportunity to do these things with such freedom and impunity?¹⁶ Could this even mean that 'Shakespeare' was an enterprise designed to produce the outstanding literature of the age through a combination of creation, take-up and enhancement; a great and influential personage being hidden somewhere as master writer and planner?¹⁷ (Greenwood's ghost smiles more broadly).

A fifth issue is that the work of Robertson suggests the continuing use of Marlowe material well into Shakespeare's 'middle period'. This is particularly intriguing since orthodox history insists that Christopher Marlowe died in May 1593.

Finally, the whole thrust of such questions as are posed here rests on the assumption that the discarded 'plural' authorship theories do have some validity. Renewed present-day interest in stylometric testing of numerous texts from previous centuries where they may be

authorship doubts, along with the presence of computer technology for carrying out some of the work that Robertson was forced to do on the lines of individual endeavor, may yet provide impetus for the revival of interest in the question of authorship unity among the texts comprising *The First Folio*. It must avoid obstacles such as those mentioned by Sams; equally it must beware of transmitting the beliefs of present orthodoxy into its raw material input for the computer. If progress can be made, this would be highly beneficial, since the voice of the 'pluralists' (Chambers and others notwithstanding) seems to some of us to have persistent, though silent, vindication in the textual evidence. It could just be that, despite his perpetual fame and the ceaseless flood of publications about him, that great author remains fundamentally unknown.

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16. "A Marlowe mystification," being the title of a letter by Robertson, published in *The Times Literary Supplement* 11th December 1924 (LMM).
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Notes

1. It is mostly orthodox Shakespearean commentators who have falsely proclaimed Greenwood to be "a Baconian" (he was even so described in his *Times* obituary and within *The Oxford Companion To English Literature* until his omission from the latter work after the 1967 edition). Yet some Baconians, even to this day, also seek to claim him for their ranks. Since we cannot quiz Greenwood and Robertson now, it is safest to assume that the views of each would still be what they consistently were during their lifetimes.
2. When Robertson died, notices duly appeared in the national press, and H. J. Laski provided a tribute within *The Dictionary of National Biography*. There was also an obituary published in the area where he had been born (*Ardrossan & Saltcoats Herald*, 13th January 1933). Yet, since then, he has been much neglected, not least in Scotland: histories of Arran and its 'celebrities' tend to mention only his service as a Member of Parliament and some even focus rather more on his maternal grandfather, affectionately known locally as 'Baron' Mackinnon. The decline in awareness of Robertson's scholarship and output may result from hostility towards his freethinking, but is more likely due simply to present-day ignorance of his accomplishments.
3. The relevant studies are M. Page, *Britain's unknown genius* (1984) and G. A. Wells, editor, *J. M. Robertson: liberal, rationalist, scholar*. (1987). Excellent though these are as general tributes, the first is short and the second, consisting of essays by various contributors, is weakest in its

appraisal of Robertson as a Shakespeare critic. Nor, alas, are literary interests reflected in his few extant letters to associates.

4. A collection of aphorisms by Francis Bacon claims that some people are like the ant, collecting things to use them; others like the bee, which gathers material but transforms and digests it by a power of its own; others again, like the spider, spin webs from their own substance. Shakespeare, as portrayed by Robertson, seems to reflect all these types.

5. Neither Greenwood nor Robertson was inclined to acknowledge possible errors. The former, when caught out in minor factual details, rather amusingly tended to put the blame on those responsible for compiling the indices to his books.

6. Writing of that particular opponent, Greenwood observes: "he must, surely, know, that controversy among gentlemen is not, and cannot be, with any decency, conducted on such lines" (VS p. 26.)

7. Robertson also remarked that all nations, whatever they possessed, had too many blockheads to the square mile. Quotations of this kind - pressing the benefits of 'continuous learning' - are to be found in a small miscellaneous category of works, outside his chief areas of interest, notably *Courses of Study* (various editions) and *What to read: a plea for the better use of public libraries* (1905).

8. Greenwood apparently often insisted that he preferred animals to some people.

9. This review was one of those cited above: *The Times*, 19th June, 1930. I can make no claim to know the identify of its author, but venture to say, on clear stylistic grounds, that the same person later penned Robertson's *Times* obituary.

10. George Bernard Shaw once laughingly called Robertson a "Chapmaniac".

11. This pamphlet, a mere 22 pages, was published at the price of one shilling.

12. The cynical may say that the rules of literary criticism are but those of politics: in determining which of two divergent views shall be future official policy, powerful senior civil servants are likely to prevail over the elected politicians.

13. The statement here quoted appears in Robertson's *Christianity and Mythology*, while, in his *History of Freethought*, he stated that any "truths which stamp the sacred records as false are met by reinterpretation of the records". Certainly Chambers offered orthodoxy an acceptable 're-interpretation'.

14. An analogy might be with a chess game, with a master opposed by machine intelligence. Beyond logic, there lies something best expressed as an intuitive approach - often needed to win difficult end games. The computer has not the essentially human power to recall: 'we have been

here before and the outcome then was ... so my conclusion now is...'

15. This remark, although fully supportive of our protagonists, brings to mind a wry comment of Churchill's in the very different context of dispute about Irish unity: "the integrity of their quarrel is ... unaltered in the cataclysm which has (since) swept the world".

16. The conclusion to which Robertson was forced - that sundry dramatists must have lodged unpublished material with the acting companies and that this was how Shakespeare managed to access it - is clearly most unsatisfactory.

17. Accepting that the oft-quoted 1592 attack on someone who was a "shake-scene" and an "upstart crow beautified with our feathers" refers to the dramatist Shakespeare gives further point to the Jonson epigram. Moreover, subsequent expression of sorrow for that attack by its publisher, Henry Chettle - a retraction which has been described as the most handsome apology of the age - surely supports a theory that there was more weight and influence behind 'Shakespeare' than was readily apparent.